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Rhetorical Monke-Shines

Nowhere “on God’s green earth”—it is fitting, as will be seen, that this article begin with a bit of bosh—nowhere is so much insufferable stuff talked in a given period of time as in an American political convention. It is then that all those objectionable elements of the national character which evoke the laughter of Europe and are the despair of our friends find freest expression, unhampered by fear of any censorship more exacting than that of “the opposing party”—which takes no account of intellectual delinquencies, but only of moral. The “organs” of the “opposing party” will not take the trouble to point out—even to observe—that the “debasement sentiments” and “criminal views” uttered in speech and platform are expressed in sickening syntax and offensive rhetoric. Doubtless an American political statesman, what you will, could go into a political convention and signify his views with simple, unpretentious common sense, but doubtless no one ever does.

Every community is cursed with a number of “orators”—men regarded as “eloquent”—“silver tongued” men—fellows who to the common American knack at waving the red flag in cave of the winds add an exceptional felicity of platitude, a captivating mastery of dog’s-eared sentiment, a copious and obedient vocabulary of eulogium, an iron insensibility to the ridiculous and an infinite affinity to fools. These afflicting Chrysostoms are always lying in wait for an “occasion.” It matters not what it is, a “reception” to some great man from abroad, a popular ceremony like the laying of a cornerstone, the opening of a fair, the dedication of a public building, an anniversary banquet of an ancient and honorable order (they all belong to ancient and honorable orders) or a club dinner—they all belong to clubs and pay dues by word of mouth. But it is in the political convention that they come out particularly strong. By some imperious tradition having the force of written law it is decreed that in these absurd bodies of our yellow citizens no word of sense shall be heard from the platform’ whatever is uttered in set speeches shall be addressed to the meanest capacity present. As a chain can be no stronger than its weakest link, so nothing said by the speakers at a political convention must be above the intellectual reach of the most pernicious idiot having a seat and a vote. I don’t know why it is so; it seems to be thought that if he is not suitably entertained he will not attend, as a delegate, the next convention.

I am writing of American conventions, and obviously have not exclusively in mind those of our own blessed state, though as far as I know, in no other is so unsufferable stuff always turned on. Doubtless this is partly due to the exceptional ignorance that demands it (for the Californian public generally is a trifle below that of any other state in point of enlightenment) and partly to our accidental possession of an unusual number of “orators” uncommonly silly.

In illustration of these remarks, and to sane understandings in proof of their justice and moderation, I point with pride to all the speeches made recently in Sacramento at both state conventions. Unluckily for the orators, I am able to do this, for many of them were

stenographically reported and the blind vanity of the others supplied the newspapers with manuscript copies of their “remarks.” By what strange fatuity an “orator” is self-persuaded to have his speech printed, who shall say if it be not vanity so blind as to think it will read as well as it sounded? To him not doubt it does, for he reads it aloud just as he spoke it, and the same ears are tickled by the same tongue. But, O, the difference to others!

Take, for example, Gen. Barnes’s affecting account of the young soldier who lay dying in Algiers—I mean in Camp Merritt. We are told by the reporter that it set one hundred (100) gray-haired men weeping. I dare say it did, and can easily imagine that it may have touched some having hair of another color, and perhaps a few with no hair at all.

Here are the opening sentences of the speech in which Orator Davis nominated Mr. Gage for the office of governor in the same convention that wept over Orator Barnes’s dying soldier:

Two years ago the Republican party in state and nation marched to imperial triumph. On every hilltop and mountain peak our beacons blazed, and we awakened the echoes of every valley with songs of our rejoicings.

And so forth. Now, if I were asked to recast those sentences so that they should conform to the simple truth and be inoffensive to good taste I should say something like this:

Two years ago the Republican party won a general election.

If there is anything in Orator Davis’s inflated rigmarole that is not adequately expressed in my amended statement, what is it? As to eloquence (and he is said to be even “eloquenter” than Barnes) he will hardly argue that nonsense, falsehood and metaphors which were old when Rome was young are essential to that. The first man (in early Greece), who spoke of awakening an echo did a felicitous thing. Was it felicitous in the second? Is it felicitous in Mr. Davis? As to that military metaphor—the “marching” and so forth—its inventor was as great an ass as any one of the incalculable multitude of his plagiarists. On this matter hear the late Richard Grant White:

Is it not time that we had done with this nauseous talk about campaigns, and standard-bearers, and glorious victories (imperial triumphs) and all the bloated army-bumming bombast which is so rife for the six months preceding an election? To read almost any one of our political papers during a canvass is enough to make one sick and sorry...An election has no manner of likeness to a campaign, or a battle. It is not even a contest in which the stronger or more dexterous party is the winner; it is a mere campaign, a counting, in which the bare fact that one party is the more numerous puts it in power if it will only come up and be counted; to insure which a certain time is spent by each party in reviling and belittling the candidates of its opponents and lauding its own; and this is the canvass, at the likening of which to a campaign every honest soldier might reasonably take offense.

But, after all, White was only “one of them dam litery fellers,” and I dare say the original proponent of the military metaphor, away off there in “the dark backward and abysm of time,” knew a lot more about practical politics than ever he did. And it is practical politics to be an ass.

Mr. Pardee is a practical politician: in withdrawing his own name from before the convention he made a purely military speech of which a single sample passage is all that I shall allow myself the happiness to quote:

I come before you today as a Republican of the Republican banner county of this great state of ours. From snowy Shasta on the north to sunny San Diego on the south; from the west, where the waves of the Pacific look upon our shores, to where the barriers of the great Sierras stand clad in eternal snow, there is no more loyal county to the Republican party in this state than the county from which I hail. (Applause, naturally, for this new version of "from Siskiyou to San Diego, from the Sierras to the sea.") Its loyalty to the party has been tested on many fields of battle (Anglice, in many elections) and it has never wavered in the contest. Whenever the fate of battle was trembling in the balance (Homer, and since Homer, Tom, Dick and Harry) Alameda County stepped into the breach and rescued the Republican party from defeat.

Translated into English Col. Pardee's military mouthing would read somewhat like this:

In Alameda County the Republicans have uniformly outvoted the Democrats.

The orators at the Democratic convention a week earlier were no better, and no different. Their rhetorical stock-in-trade was the same old shopworn figures of speech in which their predecessors have dealt for ages, and in which their successors will traffic to the end of—well, to the end of that imitative quality in the national character, which, by its superior intensity, serves to distinguish us from the apes that perish.